DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 536 CS 508 767

AUTHOR Frohlich, Romy
TITLE The "Secret Seduction" of the Press? Aspects of Characteristics of PR Influencing Media Coverage.
PUB DATE Jul 94
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (44th, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, July 11-15, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Analysis; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Information Sources; *Journalism; Mass Media Use; Media Research; *Newspapers; *Public Relations
IDENTIFIERS *Germany; Journalism Research; *Media Coverage; Press Releases; Research Suggestions

ABSTRACT

As yet, little research exists in Germany on the influence of public relations on news coverage, although for years American studies have shown that public relations widely determine media content. A study in Germany examined the qualities of news coverage as influenced by public relations efforts. Local media coverage (201 articles) in Munich newspapers between 1973 and 1983 on the two big international fairs, BAUMA (the biggest fair for building trade machines and equipment in the world) and SYSTEMS (at the time the most important fair for computer hardware and software), was analyzed. In addition all 102 press releases from the Munich Fair Association were analyzed. Results indicated that: (1) only 20% of the articles made no mention of a reason for reporting; (2) coverage with institutional events as reason for reporting was considerably more spacious than coverage with non-institutionalized events as reasons; (3) the most important theme for both the journalists and the press releases was "success of the fair"; (4) as the press releases shifted from comparatives to superlatives to describe the success of the fairs, so did the journalists; and (5) 77% to 88% of all statements, issues, or evaluations in the media coverage originally launched in the press releases indicated no information about sources. Findings suggest that there exists a parallel development concerning the change of structure of topics in press releases and local media coverage of these fairs. Further research should focus on the characteristics of public relations influencing media coverage. (Contains 12 references, 7 notes, and 5 tables of data.) (RS)

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The "Secret Seduction" of the Press?

Aspects of Characteristics of PR Influencing Media Coverage.

By

Romy Fröhlich
Assistant Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication
Institut fuer Journalistik und Kommunikationsforschung
Hochschule fuer Musik und Theater Hannover
Hohenzollernstr. 47
3000 Hannover 1 - Germany
Tel.: int. + 511/3100 285; Fax: int. + 511/66 12 98

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Paper presented to the Public Relations Division of the International Communication Association, Sydney, Australia, July 1994

The "Secret Seduction" of the Press?

Aspects of Characteristics of PR Influencing Media Coverage.

Public relations are a necessary function of organizations in modern society — who would doubt it. But since the end of the eighties, public relations more and more seem to be blamed for making society blind towards reality, and journalism, one says, has become a less-autonomous profession because of too much public relations. One speaks of the secret seduction of the press through public relations — in the United States as well as in Germany. By far, more than half of the content of daily media has its origin in public relations. But still, research does not yet show that media content is really influenced by public relations or that public relations highly determine the output of daily mass media. The results only indicate that public relations obviously are an important source of information for journalists. Because it's not sufficient to merely concentrate on the "whether" and "how much" but also on the "how", this study concentrates on the qualities of news coverage as influenced by public relations. It is a secondary analysis of data from a case study about news values in local newspapers between 1973 and 1983. The analysis was expected to provide general results about aspects of characteristics of PR influencing media coverage as well as to answer the question whether and how public relations influence changed within the period of ten years from the early seventies to the early eighties.

Public relations are a necessary function of organizations in modern society — who would doubt it. But since the end of the eighties, public relations more and more seem to be blamed for making society blind towards reality, and journalism, one says, has become a less-autonomous profession because of too much public relations. It is said more and more frequently that the process of news-gathering and news-producing increasingly is dominated by the information behavior of institutionalized sources like corporations, political parties, government offices and so on (e.g. Sigal, 1973; Baerns, 1985; Grossenbacher, 1986a, 1986b; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Ruß-Mohl, 1989; VanSlyke Turk, 1986). One speaks of the secret seduction of the press through public relations — in the United States as well as in Germany.

Messages, statements or evaluations from PR departments or agencies, which are common in our media, undoubtedly mean a challenge for the independence of journalism, its autonomy and objectivity. If journalists, in addition, fail to identify those messages, statements and evaluations as content which stems from PR departments, PR people or PR agencies, the audience is no longer able to classify or interpret the messages of the media correctly because the importance or consequence of media information for the most part depends on those people or institutions who give voice to this information. Thus we should know whether our media content is still the product of independent journalism or whether public relations have too much influence on the media.

While there are a lot of studies on PR and its influence on news coverage in the States, there is little research on this topic in Germany. For years, American studies show that public relations widely determine media content. In 1973 Sigal found about 60% of the Washington political news stemming from PR offices, divisions, or agencies (1973, p. 121). And Chomsky 1988 showed that even so-called elite or quality newspapers are not able to

escape the modern "news management" of the public relations profession (see Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

In Germany, the first, and so far most comprehensive project, had been conducted by Barbara Baerns (1985). Bearns' results show evidence that 60% to 70% of local political news in daily newspapers as well as in local radio and television came from public relations sources. With these results, Baerns could support older case studies on the influence of public relations on media coverage (Hintermeier, 1982; Lang, 1980; Nissen & Menningen, 1977).

Most of the studies dealing with the influence of PR on media coverage concentrate on the quantity of coverage stemming from PR activities. Only few studies have also looked at how PR has effected qualities of the coverage. One of Lang's (1980) results, for example, comes to the following conclusion: press releases which are selected for publication by the journalist mostly are used without fundamental changes of their content. Lang found that certainly no selected press release remains without revision. But his analysis of the media content showed that the coverage mainly consisted of a summing up of the messages contained in the press releases the journalists used (p. 155). Nissen and Menningen got similar results in 1977 (p. 165).

In 1986, René Grossenbacher (1986a, 1986b) did an input-output analysis comparing press releases from 53 press conferences with the respective media coverage about these conferences. In the German speaking area of Europe, Grossenbacher's study is the only one so far, which deals with the question of qualitative influence of public relations on media coverage. His results clearly show that patterns of valuing in press releases are adopted by the journalists in an only slightly altered form.

By far, more than half of the content of daily media has its origin in public relations.

But still, all these results do not yet show that media content is really influenced by public relations or that public relations highly determine the output of daily mass media. Those results only indicate that public relations obviously are an important source of information for journalists. Because it's not sufficient to merely concentrate on the "whether" and "how much" but also on the "how", I wanted to look at the qualities of news coverage as influenced by PR efforts.

The Survey

This study is a secondary analysis of data from a case study about news values in local newspapers. The local media coverage between 1973 and 1983 on the two big international fairs BAUMA[1] and SYSTEMS[2] in Munich was the topic of research. The total BAUMA- and SYSTEMS-coverage of all five Munich newspapers had been analysed. In addition all press releases of the Munich Fair Association Ltd. (MMG) concerning these two big fairs between 1973 and 1983 had been analysed — in total 201 articles and 102 press releases.

The secondary analysis of the data was expected to provide general results about qualitative similarities of public relations material and the respective media coverage. It also aimed to answer the question whether and how this similarity changed within the period of ten years from the early seventies to the early eighties. The survey began with the year 1973 because this year was a starting-block for a boom in public relations in Germany. In those days, modern European industrialized countries, after a seemingly irresistible boom of the economy, for the first time had been confronted with a very problematic phase. The oil shortage at the end of 1973, the world-wide recession as a result of that shortage and an increasingly critical discussion about the environmental destruction caused by industry, heavily burdened the relationship between industry and the public. At that time — almost

overnight — public relations in Germany gained the kind of importance for the economy and industry which we today take for granted.

Because of the fact that the texts of both groups of material — press releases as well as news articles — dealt with the same topics, the whole material was analysed with one set of categories. Three dimensions of this set of categories dealt with the question of how media content reflects PR material or PR messages: structure of themes in press releases and articles, the transparency of sources in the articles, and reasons for reporting explicitly or implicitly mentioned in the article (like opening of the fair, final press conference, interview and so on). The category "structure of themes" was expected to provide results to the question whether there exists parallelism between media coverage and content of press releases, to the question how prominent this parallelism is and finally to the question whether there can be observed any changes of this parallelism in the ten years.

The category "transparency of sources in articles" was expected to provide results to the question of whether journalists identified their sources in case of using messages and evaluations stemming from PR material. The category "reasons for reporting" was selected to check the role of institutionalized and officially organized events for reporting, like press conferences, official opening events and so on.

And there was an additional category selected to compare the content of the press releases with the content of the media coverage. This category was "terminology for success".[3] Which terminology would the press prefer to describe success or failure of the respective fairs, which one the MMG?

Findings

We first focus on the question of reasons for reporting. Only 20% of the articles did not mention a reason for reporting at all. As it was expected from previous results of Baerns (1985) and Grossenbacher (1986a, 1986b), institutionalized events organized by the MMG by far were the most important reason for reporting (61%). The opening accounted for 32% of coverage, press conferences of the MMG during the fairs 15%, and the end of a fair, which usually is also accompanied by a broad PR effort of the MMG, reached 14%.

A second result shows additional evidence that the share of journalists' self-initiated coverage is lower than their coverage initiated by institutionalized events: coverage with institutional events as reason for reporting was considerably more spacious than coverage with non-institutionalized events as reasons (see Table 1).

Table 1: Volume of Article in Comparison to Reason for Reporting

Reason:	Institutionalized Resasons for Reporting	Other Reasons for Reporting	
Volume (cm2):			
- 27	16%	44%	27%
28 - 72	25%	29%	27%
73 - 147	25%	18%	22%
148 +	34%	9%	24%
Basis:	95	66	161
chi-square: 22,32 $p<0,01$			

These results are an initial but weak indication of PR influencing media coverage. But they show that institutionalized events obviously have comparatively good news value and thus a better chance to gain broad coverage. Public relations obviously are able to provide reasons for reporting through organizing events which seems to directly lead to the control on volume of coverage.

Do public relations also determine the structure of themes of media coverage? Which themes are preferred by the press, which ones by the MMG? For the PR material as well as for the media coverage, between 1973 and 1983 the most important theme in terms of quantity was "success of the fair"[4]. But all further theme-positions indicate that, despite the high amount of institutionalized reasons for reporting, the press obviously prefers other topics to report on than the PR material offers.

A comparison of the themes in terms of quantity showed that "success" as the most important theme between 1973 and 1983 declined in the PR material while remaining the top issue there. At the same time it surprisingly declined in the media coverage, too, but also still remained the top issue of the press.[5]

A look at the "terminology for success" used in both groups of material provides further evidence for the thesis that media content follows the content of the PR material. Between 1973 and 1983[6] the MMG changed its way of describing the success of a fair (see Table 2). Instead of writing "this year SYSTEMS/BAUMA was a good/successful fair" or choosing the comparative in its phrases like "this year SYSTEMS/BAUMA was better than the last one" (including similar compositions), the MMG more and more switched over to use the superlative like "this year SYSTEMS/BAUMA was the best SYSTEMS/BAUMA we ever had". And again this is also true for the media coverage between 1973 and 1983. The journalists, too, changed their terminology for the description of success. Increasingly, they used constructions with the superlative instead of the comparative, which they mainly used before.

Table 2: Terminology for "Success": Development from 1973 through 1983 for PR Material and Media Coverage						
	Press Releases:			Media Coverage:		
	73/75	77/79	81/83	73/75	77/79	81/83
No Statement on Success at all	27%	24%	28%	50%	44%	48%
Failure	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Good Fair	43%	17%	0%	19%	13%	5%
Better Fair	18%	15%	14%	17%	7%	9%
Best Fair	11%	43%	57%	14%	36%	38%
Basis:	33	35	34	68	60	73

In the media coverage, as well as in MMG's PR material, statements on "success" of a fair very often were presented in connection with statistical material and figures on issues like "number of international visitors", "exhibitor or visitor opinion polls" or "information on sales and bookings". From 1973 to 1983, MMG increasingly presented figures in its PR material. And again, the press did so, too (see Table 3).

Table 3: Development of Presentation of Figures and Statistics in Media Coverage and PR Material Between 1973 and 1983[7]						
	Press Releases:			Media Coverage:		
	73/75	77/79	81/83	73/75	77/79	81/83
No Figures and Statistics at all	11%	25%	24%	18%	22%	24%
Some Figures and/or Statistics	67%	50%	43%	55%	46%	40%
A lot of Figures and/or Statistics	10%	15%	19%	27%	32%	36%
Only Figures (Tables, Graphics...)	12%	10%	14%	0%	0%	0%
Basis:	33	35	34	68	60	73

An additional "figures category" measured whether the figures referred to the particular industry showing its goods, to the trade cycle and general economic situation or whether they referred to the fair itself, means to the amount of exhibitors and visitors, to the size of exhibition space or to results from opinion polls. Table 4 shows the change in media coverage and PR material between 1973 and 1983.

Table 4: Figures Referring to MMG/Fair or to the Branch and Trade Cycle

	Press Releases:			Media Coverage:		
	73/75	77/79	81/83	73/75	77/79	81/83
Figures referring to:						
MMG/Fair	83%	73%	67%	77%	70%	54%
Particular Industry/Trade Cycle	9%	12%	15%	26%	33%	39%
No Figures at all	11%	25%	24%	18%	22%	24%
Basis:	33	35	34	68	60	73

In 1973 the press releases of the MMG contained nearly ten times more figures referring to the MMG or its fairs than referring to the particular industry or to the trade cycle. This changed in the course of time. MMG increased the share of figures referring to the particular industry or to the trade cycle and at the same time decreased figures referring to MMG or the fairs. Nevertheless MMG in 1983 still published much more figures referring to itself and its respective fairs than to the particular industry and the trade cycle. And — not surprising — this again is true for the media coverage.

The results presented so far suggest that there exists a parallel development concerning the change of structure of topics in both groups of material. The press seems to rely on the PR material. Does the press make this dependence on PR material transparent to its audience? Do journalists inform their audience within their articles about the sources they use? Do they name the source when citing an evaluation or a critical statement which originally does not stem from themselves? The results from this secondary analysis say, "mostly they do not". Seventy-seven percent to 88% of all statements, issues or evaluations in the media coverage which originally were launched by the MMG through its PR material remain without any information about the source. Only the media coverage on the particular industry and on the German and international trade cycle is an exception to the rule with only 30% to 52% of all statements, issues or evaluations remaining without any information about the source.

Discussion

As many PR-input-output studies before, this study, too, is not able to answer a crucial question: Are journalists kind of 'last assistants' of PR? Do they just act upon the topical schemes which PR material provides? Do they adopt without thinking the content offered by clever PR practitioners? The kind of parallelism revealed in this study also could be the result of 'mutual consideration' of public relations professionals, journalists, and their respective needs. Finally each behavior of a subject is both an answer to a previous behavior of a partner it is interacting with as well as a stimulus for the future behavior of this partner. Thus each behavior partly is a dependent and partly an independent variable (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p. 2). Couldn't it be that PR practitioners know the needs of the press very well and thus direct their effort on these ever changing needs of the press? In other words: isn't PR following the press?

Still further, PR practitioners are *expected* to follow the needs of the press. This brings up the question about the chicken and the egg. What was first, the need of the press for specially prepared material, its need for 'super news', its need for figures and statistics or the creation of these needs through PR material? Or did the PR material not merely meet the needs of the press instead of creating them? The last interpretation seems to be possible, especially for this case study of local media and local public relations because the relationship between local press and local public relations is a comparatively close one. But still, this does not change the fact that media coverage highly relies on public relations material. This is questionable in particular because journalists obviously tend to not mention their sources in their stories.

It's the task of public relations to encourage positive relations between organizations and their publics. This is the reason for public relations output ignoring negative aspects which could be of a disadvantage for the respective organization or institution. For its part, journalism, too, is producing very selective products because journalists only can process that information which is available to them or which they can obtain through inquiries. The closer media coverage follows PR output the more asymmetrical the picture of the world we get through mass media will be. This one-sidedness is intensified when journalists do not draw their audiences' attention to the fact that the presented 'facts' stem from institutionalized sources.

Public relations are still a booming profession in western societies. Will we soon have to hold PR practitioners instead of journalists responsible for the content of our media coverage? Research does not yet provide reliable results on this question. We need more detailed information about the process of public relations influencing media coverage. Therefore we finally should abandon the concentration on quantities of news coverage as influenced by public relations efforts and instead increasingly focus on research which provides results on the characteristics of public relations influencing media coverage. This case study provided an approach for a first step on the way we should follow.

NOTES

1. The BAUMA is the biggest fair for building trade machines and equipment in the world.

2. The SYSTEMS then was the most important fair for computer hard-ware and soft-ware (today CEBIT in Hannover is the most important fair in this field). Between 1973 and 1983 BAUMA and SYSTEMS had been organized alternating every second year.

3. "The fair was good", "The fair was better than last year", "It was the best fair since organizing it", "Failure" and "No statement on success or failure at all".

4. Of course this category also measured "failure of the fair" (for example declining number of exhibitors or declining number of visitors...). But the press covered failure only in one article. As one can image, it was not found at all in the PR material.

5. For example: In 1973, 72% of all press releases contained statements on "success". Ten years later only 59% did so. In 1973 the press covered "success" in 49% of all it's articles, but ten years later only 30% of the articles covered this topic. Similar results where found for individual share (cm2) of issues.

6. As already mentioned, both fairs had been organized alternating every second year. This is the reason for a relative low number of cases (coverage and press releases) per year. Thus the years are compiled in such a way that the whole period of time (10 years) is subdivided into three phases.

7. This category measured the quantitiy of figures and statistics presented in both groups of material as follows: a) "The text does not contain any figures or statistics at all", b) "The text contains some figures and/or statistics (= less than one fourth of the total amount of an article's or press release's lines contains figures, verbalized figures or statistics. In case of more than one figure or verbalized figure in one line the respective line counts double, triple and so on)", c) "The text contains a lot of figures and/or statistics (= one fourth and more of the total amount of an article's or press release's lines contains figures, verbalized figures or statistics. In case of more than one figure or verbalized figure in one line the respective line counts double, triple and so on)", d) "Figures are presented in tables or graphics".

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